

## Time to Try on Some New Clothes

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Isaiah 53: 1-8 and 1 Peter: 3:8-22

There is a well-known fairy tale written by the famous author, Hans Christian Andersen in the 1800s. In it, the main character, an Emperor of an unnamed kingdom is consumed by his own ego. From the very beginning, what we learn about the ruler is that he cares nothing for his soldiers, his staff, or his people. Rather, he spends his time and money focusing on his clothes. In Andersen's own words: *Instead of saying, as one might, about any other ruler, "The King's in council," here they always said, "The Emperor's in his dressing room."*<sup>1</sup>

This emperor lives a seemingly charmed and uncomplicated life. Things are going well in his kingdom and people are generally happy, until a pair of swindlers come to town. They see the ruler's narcissism and they are quick to exploit it, marketing themselves as tailors who could weave the most exquisite fabrics into the finest patterns and designs. In fact, their designs were so unique that only intelligent and wise people could see them. To the foolish and simple-minded, the cloth would be invisible. Predictably driven by his own arrogance, the Emperor is convinced that he *must* have new clothes made by these intriguing travelers.

The swindlers sit by their looms for long hours and invite the Emperor to come and see how things are going. He shies away, however, and sends others in his place with instructions to report back about the rare and expensive new clothes. Each of his stand-ins are shocked by what they see when they check in on the working tailors. He sent first an old minister and then a trusted official who were both shocked at their inability to see the fabric. Feeling ashamed of their inability to see the illusive cloth, they lied about what they had seen, telling the Emperor that the new clothes "left them spellbound" and that they were unimaginably beautiful.

In light of all the excitement and anticipation, the Emperor finally decides that he needs to see the clothes himself. So he surrounds himself with a cadre of trusted advisors, including the two who had already reported back, and he goes to see for himself how the outfit is coming along.

Upon his arrival he immediately notices that the looms appear to be empty. The tailors are there going through the motions of their craft but in the Emperor's eyes, there is no thread; there is no cloth. Ashamed that he must be the greatest of fools because he cannot see that which others around him have sworn to see, the Emperor lies and celebrates the work of the swindlers saying, "Oh! How beautiful!"

Soon, his supporters follow suit, joining in the chorus of praise, even though not one person in the room could see anything at all resembling fabric, thread, or clothing. The

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<sup>1</sup> [https://andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes\\_e.html](https://andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html)

rouse continues into the dressing room where the swindlers pretend to fasten the new garments around the naked Emperor.

His trusted advisors, nervously trying to hide their own shame go along with it, complimenting the fit, the style, the colors, and encouraging the Emperor to go and parade around the city.

Once outside the palace and in the streets, the ruler walked with hesitant pride, as his subjects, all nervously trying to assert their own intelligence and sophistication joined the chorus of the advisors. "How lovely! How unique! How exquisite!" they cried out until at once their cries were interrupted by the honest and humble voice of a child who spoke the truth: *But he hasn't got anything on!*

*The Emperor shivered, for he suspected they were right. But he thought, "This procession has got to go on." So he walked more proudly than ever, as his noblemen held high the train that wasn't there at all.<sup>2</sup>*

My first memory of this story was pretty early in life. I must have been in kindergarten (or close to it), with a group of peers attending a show at the local children's theater. I remember laughing until my cheeks hurt at the hilarity of a grown man, an Emperor no less, parading around the streets naked, and yet perpetuating a lie that everyone could quite literally see right through.

It is unbelievably ridiculous.

Until it isn't.

Revisiting this fairy tale with adult experience behind us shows us a more frightening precautionary tale about the dangers of narcissism, pride, and an over-inflated ego. The Emperor in Andersen's fairy tale wanted so badly to believe that he was smarter, wiser, and more sophisticated than others in his kingdom. These were the props that held him up and justified that he was worthy to rule the land. He wanted to believe it so badly that he easily bought into a lie that – though it was completely ridiculous – it reinforced what he was desperate to believe and it helped him to hide his own shame about who he really was.

In that twisted alternate universe the Emperor created, it was better to walk through the streets of his kingdom naked and proud, than it was to admit that he was foolish enough to speak the truth: there was no fancy cloth, there was no golden thread, there were no new clothes.

He could not bear to suffer the truth about his humanity. That he may be foolish. That he may be unworthy. That he may be unfit to hold his leadership position. If that is what it meant that he could not see the fabric the swindlers came to sell him. Admitting to what

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

was really happening would mean that he had to face his own insecurities and his own shame that he was so used to covering up with the finest clothes his money could buy.

His shame may be exaggerated by the narrative, but it isn't that much of a stretch from how many of us live our lives. No, we don't parade around wearing invisible clothing to cover up our vulnerabilities but we do make choices about what to believe and who to listen to, often choosing those who reinforce what we already think and who tell us things we want to hear. It's safer that way, we are not exposed and at risk. We don't have to suffer the isolation and humiliation of being wrong. We put on our own versions of New Clothing every time we erupt in anger that blames somebody else for our own failures, every time we point fingers at the proverbial "other side" for getting it all wrong, every time we imagine that they are wrong and we are right – we put on the clothing of pride, arrogance, and ego – parading around the streets pretending that we see what's true and real while others are too foolish to recognize it.

Perhaps the greatest irony in all of this is that the only one who sees the whole truth is God.

And if we pay attention to God's interventions, we might find a better model for our own... at least if we want to begin to see.

The prophet Isaiah describes the Suffering Servant, the messiah, the embodiment of God's love in this world like this:

*he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.  
He was despised and rejected by others;  
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity...  
... He was oppressed, afflicted, and yet he did not open his mouth...  
...by a perversion of justice he was taken away...*

This image of a humble God is reinforced again in the Gospels as Jesus takes on the suffering of the people, living among them and offering healing, food, and wholeness wherever he can, often at his own risk and expense.

How much easier would it have been for Jesus to embody the power of his true social location: King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Savior of the World... Instead he dined with prostitutes and sinners, he opened the door to foreigners and strangers, and he held out his hand for lepers to grab onto... not concerned about the scars his body might earn in the process.

Then later as the church begins to grow in the aftermath of Jesus' death and resurrection, the earliest Christians are reminded that their unity is found in humility rather than in arrogance, pride, and being right all the time. The words from 1 Peter read moments ago are an example of just that. The author reminds the early Christians in Asia Minor to: *Have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart and a humble mind (3:8).*

Those sound like clothes we could all stand to try on, don't they? Clothes made in the fabric of unity, sympathy, tenderness, love and humility? Of course, if we dared to dawn that kind of wardrobe, we'd have to be willing to accept our human imperfections. We'd have to be able to admit that we were wrong, from time to time. We'd have to confess that we didn't see the whole picture.

On their podcast called, *Learning to See*, contemporary theologians Brian McLaren, Jacqui Lewis, and Richard Rohr talk about a current phenomenon that feels a lot like an "Emperor's New Clothes" experience. Brian McLaren was a conservative evangelical pastor for some time before becoming a writer and well sought after speaker. You may recognize his name from books like *A Generous Orthodoxy* or *A New Kind of Christian*. Jacqui Lewis is the Senior Minister of Middle Collegiate Church – a multiracial, multicultural congregation in New York City, also the oldest continuous church in this country. Lewis also has her PhD. in psychology and religion from Drew University. Richard Rohr is a Franciscan priest and a very famous contemporary theologian who often speaks and writes on the non-dual thinking and the necessary connection between action and contemplation.

The entire podcast series is based on one central question: *How can we learn to see?*

Fleshing that out a little more in the opening statements, McLaren says it this way: [In the aftermath of major episodes of division and unrest] *How can we learn to see what's really there, to see what our neighbor sees but that we've always missed, to help others see what we see, to open our eyes together and see what we've never seen, or to even be able to see? If you've ever read the gospels, McLaren continues, you'll remember that Jesus has a lot to say about seeing. 'You have eyes,' he said, 'but you do not see.' How can we learn to see?*<sup>3</sup>

Over the course of a 37-minute long conversation, the three arrive at a simple answer to this question. Bias. We cannot see and understand one another because before we even hear somebody's story, before we turn on the news, before we sit down to have a difficult conversation, we already have ideas about what we will see, what we will hear, and what it will mean. Those ideas are constructed from our own experiences and they are hard to see without accepting a great measure of... you got it... *humility*.

Our human brains are wired to create meaning out of our experiences. It is part of who we are and how we were made. But when we let those parts of our human nature run unchecked by the spiritual virtues of humility and love for one another, we can fall prey to the lies of our world that tell us we shouldn't have to suffer, we shouldn't have to compromise, we shouldn't have to deal with the mess that others create... because we've got it all right and they've got it all wrong.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://cac.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/LHTS\\_Episode1.pdf?\\_ga=2.1441649.1792457109.1613749584-24654094.1613749584](https://cac.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/LHTS_Episode1.pdf?_ga=2.1441649.1792457109.1613749584-24654094.1613749584)

I think this kind of thinking is the reason we've become so prone to tear one another down rather than building one another up. Rather than choosing the clothes of honesty and humility, we have opted for clothes made of the fine fabrics of self-righteousness and personal security. And in so doing, we have chosen the wisdom of the naked Emperor over the foolishness of the child who sees right through the scam.

We are all one. And every slur and scowl we throw at one another either online, in person, or behind somebody's back really tears a hole in our own souls and deep within the heart of God.

There is a lot of talk about healing these days. I'm excited about that because there is a whole lot of disease and illness from which we need to be made whole. But friends, there can be no healing without truth, without vulnerability, without humility, and without love. It is going to take all of us admitting when we've been wrong and owning up to the reality that we don't know the whole story.

So I wonder if in this season of Lent, a season which calls us all to remember the brokenness of our human condition, if we might start by cleaning out our wardrobes and trying on some new clothes.

Perhaps where there was arrogance, we might try on selflessness.  
Where there was pride, we might attempt humility.  
Where there was ego, perhaps we might become meek.  
And as we dress ourselves on each of these cold February days,  
perhaps we might choose the coat of love over everything else underneath.

I don't know about you, but I'd hate to be caught off guard, parading around out in the cold, and called out by a foolish child who could see right through the scam.